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SERMON CCCVII.

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THE PREACHING OF ANOTHER GOSPEL
ACCURSED.

"I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another Gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed."—Galatians, 1: 6-9.

How full are these words of force and solemnity. Let us fix the mind on them until we feel their significance. Is it a profane blasphemer, who opens his mouth only to pour forth execrations, who has "clothed himself with cursing as with a garment," and whose malignant feelings towards his fellow-man assume the awful form of an appeal to heaven? No; it is one who delighted rather in blessing; and who, cruelly as he was hated by his own nation, requited their enmity only with the most earnest wishes for their salvation, though he were himself accursed to obtain it. Is it the hot haste of a good man speaking

unadvisedly, and rather according to the infirmity of the man than the sobriety of the saint? The very form into which it is cast, and the calm, firm repetition of its tremendous denunciations, stamps it as the language of deliberation. Far from being an outburst of human passion, the language is that of one full of the Holy Ghost, of one selected and sent forth by Christ to be an authoritative teacher of the churches—an inspired apostle. They are not the words of human infirmity, but the utterances of a holy God and a true,—his unerring and “lively oracles.” May, then, that Spirit which *spoke* in Paul *hearken* in us. The truth here taught us, if awful, is yet a salutary and timely one. We learn,

- I. That it is possible to ascertain what the true Gospel is;
- II. That the Gospel is unchangeable;
- III. And that they who pervert it are accursed.

I. It is possible to acquire certainty as to the true nature of the Gospel. Paul’s language throughout the epistle implies this. It would have been most unreasonable and most cruel thus to denounce those whose doubts as to the real purport of the Gospel were unavoidable and excusable. He makes no exceptions for ignorance, and prejudice, and heedlessness. He needed to make none. He had credentials, such as none of their false teachers brought, that Christ had sent him to preach the Gospel. Miracles, prophecies, and the moral results of his preaching, proclaimed him one commissioned of God. As to the doctrines he had taught, they could be left in no doubt. He assumes that the distinction between his own gospel and that of the rival teachers was palpable on the most cursory examination; and that his rudest hearers were competent to perceive the difference between the opposing doctrines, and were bound to make the requisite discrimination. He had spoken clearly and without reserve; consistently and without variation. He had in Galatia, as every where else, taught that men were sinners and could not be saved by their own good deeds; but that Christ “*gave himself for us*,” (chap. 1: 4;) and having died as the sacrifice, arose as the High Priest; and that, repenting and believing,

men might be justified freely in his righteousness, and accepted through his mediation. He had taught that by nature all inherited and deserved the wrath of God; but that through Jesus the Holy Spirit was given, producing a change of heart. He had taught that the fruit of the Spirit thus given would be necessarily holiness of life in each true convert. Christ, the crucified Redeemer, the Holy Spirit, the great renewer and enlightener of the world, were the theme of his familiar converse, his ministrations and his writings. There was no want of certainty, then, as to what he had taught, and what they should believe.

2. But we find men, after excusing themselves for having spent a whole lifetime in a state of spiritual irresolution, or what is rather indifference to all religion, sheltering themselves under the plea, that amid contending systems and warring pulpits they cannot ascertain what the Gospel really is. Some, calling themselves christian teachers, assure them that there is no hell, but that death is to every man the gate of heaven. Others contend that Christ had no inherent deity, and made no propitiatory sacrifice. He was but a wise and good teacher, and if men are saved, it is not by his atonement or by any other substitute sacrificed in their stead. Others, again, teach that Christ did indeed die for our salvation, but that it is our own meritorious conduct and character that entitle us to his salvation, or in other words, we are saved by our own righteousness. Amid the teachers who thus stand contending with each other, and contradicting the testimony of the great body of Christians in all ages, these irresolute men profess to be at a loss what sentiments to receive. And sometimes they wish that they had lived in the primitive ages of the church, and could have heard the Gospel from the lips of the apostles themselves.

Let such remember, then, that in the apostles' times they would have been subjected to the same perplexity of which they complain in our own. Let them remember, also, that they would then have found relief only from the same sources to which they are directed now. If they are distressed by the many and contradictory teachings of human guides, the Galatians were exposed to the same trial. While the apostles yet lived, the churches they had themselves planted and instructed were visited by

those who taught another Gospel. Paul had taught a righteousness by faith in Christ that magnified the cross. These false teachers taught a righteousness that was of the law, making void the cross of Christ. In what way were the Galatians to know the truth? The apostle was not always with them. They had his teachings treasured in their memory, and as recorded in his epistles. They had the teachings of other apostles, and of uninspired teachers known to accord in their doctrines with the inspired and authoritative guides of the church. And they had the Scriptures of the Old Testament. But above all these, they had unimpeded access to God, and the Spirit of God was their counsellor. Under what process of teaching, and in what type of doctrine had they received this Spirit? In that teaching and doctrine let them persevere. That Spirit, sought in prayer, would explain the Scriptures, and guide rightly and safely. If we are in the providence of God brought unto similar conflicts from the opposing dogmas of men, we have the same resort in the Scriptures, and the like refuge in the Spirit of God. The volume gives no uncertain response; the Holy Ghost is no tardy or inefficient instructor.

3. Now is it not most irrational,—we appeal, my fellow-immortals, to your own consciences,—is it not most irrational to stun and weary your ears with the din of human controversies, while you make no appeal to the original authorities? Are you sincerely in quest of truth? Had you been told of an estate bequeathed you by some distant friend, and one informant spoke of it as small in amount, and another described it as being of great value, and you found yourself involved in a whirlwind of contradictory statements; would you compare and collate the rumors on every side, and form your opinion from them, or appeal at once to the written will and the surrogate? If you were told that your home was in flames, would you go around questioning those who had left the scene as to its origin, and extent, and ravages; or would you not rather cast aside all other engagements, and rush to the rescue of your property and your family, to see with your own eyes, and toil with your own hands? And are salvation, and the soul, and heaven worth so little that they do not

require the like personal investigation, the like decisive appeal to the ultimate authorities?

Prophets and apostles, and the Lord of apostles and the Master of the prophets, hold in this case but one language. They refer you to the record. "To the law and to the testimony," cried the prophets; if your teachings—if your teachers speak not according to these, it is because "there is no truth in them." "Search the Scriptures," is the command of Christ; "which are able to make you wise unto salvation," respond the glorious company of the apostles. Do you complain of dulness and weakness of mind? they reply, "If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God, who giveth liberally, and who upbraideth not:" and a louder and sweeter voice than theirs is heard, continuing the strain—"The Spirit shall lead unto all truth;"—while the prophets, catching and re-echoing the invitation thus addressed to weak and erring man, exclaim, "The wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein."

Until the Scriptures, therefore, are abrogated, and until the Spirit of God has abdicated his office as teacher of the church, you cannot be at a loss, if disposed, in a candid and docile spirit, to learn what are the real doctrines of the Gospel. If a man will not ask that Spirit, indeed, he may have the ablest of human teachings, and bring to the book an intellect of angelic power, and yet the result be but error and darkness. But if he will come in the name of Jesus, imploring the Spirit, idiocy itself shall not prevent his learning the way of salvation. If he refuses thus to come, and will not study the book of God in God's own appointed way, he is not entitled to complain of uncertainty as to his religious opinions, much less to dogmatize in his scepticism. Let us, then, in this matter be honest to our own souls, for death is on his way: a judge is even now at the door, who will not stoop to answer our callings; and wretched then will be the fate of that man, who, with the open Bible before him, and the hovering dove of the Spirit above him, has neglected the one and repelled the other.

Make but the experiment in the temper of a little child, and a certainty, sure and unshaken as the everlasting hills, shall possess your souls, while truth darts in upon the darkened mind,

and in the light of God you see light—the uncreated, undeclining glory of God, in the face of his Son. Then shall you know that Gospel which Paul preached, and whose promises he is now inheriting.

II. But again, the religion of which we may thus obtain a certain knowledge is *unchangeable* in its character. We hear men, sometimes, in forgetfulness of this character of christianity, exclaiming, “Shall science and art go on, from day to day altering their forms and extending their boundaries, and religion alone receive and admit no improvement?” If they mean that the language of the Bible may be better understood, and that new researches of the antiquarian and traveller, and new fulfilments of prophecy, may throw new and yet increasing light on the pages of the sacred volume—if they mean only, that in days of higher devotedness, such as the church is yet to see, there may be a more thorough mastery of the doctrines and a more resplendent exhibition of the morals of christianity—this no christian denies; but that the facts of christianity can be modified, its morality be amended, or its doctrines altered is impossible. Those who suppose it, forget that the Gospel is not a *discovery* but a *revelation*.

2. The Gospel is not a discovery but a revelation. By a discovery we mean what man’s intellect has found out by its own efforts: by a revelation, what God’s intellect has communicated to man’s intellect, and what, if not thus aided, man could not have discovered for himself. The one is the fruit of man’s labor, the other the gift of God’s grace. Now, what man’s intellect has discovered, man’s intellect may investigate more thoroughly and understand more perfectly. But what man has learned only from God’s disclosures, he can of course understand no further than he finds it on the face of those disclosures. He cannot go up to the original truths themselves upon which God drew, and thus improve on the Divine communications. Some of the disclosures thus made are, from the very necessity of our nature, or from a wise regard to our present interests and duties, imperfect revelations, leaving portions of the subject shrouded in darkness. These imperfect revelations are called mysteries. With the limits set by the Divine mind to his revelations, our

investigations must terminate: the attempt to pass beyond these is not only temerity, it is folly and ruin. The adventurer dashes himself to his own destruction against the impassable barriers of the human intellect.

When Columbus found our continent, it was a *discovery*. Where one man had gone, other men might follow, and inquire more fully, and learn more correctly than did the original discoverer, and thus our knowledge of America may be destined to receive daily improvements. But when Paul was rapt into the third heaven, and saw and heard what it was unlawful to utter, it was a *revelation*. No mortal foot could follow him, to pursue and improve his account. Now, had it been permitted Paul to describe in writing the celestial glories thus unveiled to him, those who wished to understand the nature of that upper world would have but one course left for them to pursue. They must investigate Paul's character for veracity, and the evidences he adduced that the Most High had conferred on him so transcendent a favor as to be admitted to become a visitant there. When they had settled these questions, all that their philosophy could do would be but to explain Paul's language as they found it in his descriptions. They could not hope for further knowledge of the world described, unless God should choose to make a fresh revelation to another Paul. No telescope could read what his vision had left unread—no created wing could bear the student up the pathless skies to investigate what Paul had left untold: no stretch of human sagacity could add to the record as the apostle left it. With the first discoverer of our western world it was different: his account sent back to Europe could be continually amended and enlarged; and the school-boy of our times may know more of the new world than did the sagacious navigator who first conjectured and then established its existence.

III. Now, the Gospel is strictly a *revelation*. It tells us of a world which we can enter for ourselves only by dying: it tells us of the nature and will of our God what none but he could tell, and of which we can know only as much as he has chosen to tell. As the human intellect did not discover the Gospel, so no advancement of the human intellect can amend or alter it: but we have heard and read of men who have dared to say,

"Christ came to set up a dispensation ; it is now past ; it has done service in its day, but its day is now gone by. The Gospel needed by our refined and scientific times must be a new dispensation." We shudder at the profanity of the spirit that can vent itself in language of such impious arrogance ; for no man may claim to come with a new dispensation, unless he comes heralded by such prophecies as ushered Christ's way, and attended by such miracles as marked the whole course of the Redeemer. We say to the sophists and dreamers who talk thus madly of the perfectibility of human nature, and its need of a new and amended Gospel, "Produce your witnesses ; let the winds obey your bidding, and the waves become the fixed and stable pavement of your feet ; give eyes to the blind, and call the dead from their tombs ; speak, as Christ spoke, the words of Divine wisdom ; and read, as did he, the secrets of the heart. Die as Christ died, with the earth heaving beneath, and the heavens darkened above to attest their sympathy with and their subjection to the mighty sufferer. And having done this, you have but half done your mission : show the niche in ancient prophecy reserved for your coming. When Jesus appeared, he came in the train of a long procession of prophets, who had before witnessed of his coming, and carried the line of their testimony, in unbroken continuity, from Eden up to Calvary. He did, indeed, supersede a former dispensation ; but that very dispensation had predicted its own departure and described Christ's advent. Does the present dispensation, that of Christ's Gospel, speak of itself as being thus transient and temporary ? No, it claims to endure till yon sun shall have forsaken his station : the Gospel is an everlasting Gospel. Does Moses or does Christ foretell your new Gospel ? The Bible has else no room for it. Yes, they do foretell it ; but it is in the language of Enoch ; it is the Gospel which the seventh from Adam foretold,—the Gospel '*of hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against the Lord,*' and of which the Lord '*when he cometh with ten thousand of his saints,*' shall '*convince the ungodly.*'" Jude, 14 : 15. Mad were the builders of Babel, when they would raise the tower, whose foot was on the earth, up to the heavens ; but they who would, by human discoveries, build up a new and better Gospel, are the builders yet more insane of a Babel yet more impious.

IV. But it will be urged that there have been men of very considerable austerity of morals, and of high pretensions to wisdom, who have taught a gospel very different from Paul's. Were it not uncharitable to condemn them? We will not undertake, for ourselves, to answer this question. To their own Master they stand or fall; but if their Master have spoken, in his own oracles, in reply to this question, we must not suppress or condemn the response that has been given. By his Spirit, then, in his servant Paul, he has replied, and his language is, "**BUT THOUGH WE, OR AN ANGEL FROM HEAVEN, PREACH ANY OTHER GOSPEL UNTO YOU THAN THAT WHICH WE HAVE PREACHED UNTO YOU, LET HIM BE ACCURSED.**" We are taught in the Scriptures, by men's moral fruits, to judge whether they are true disciples of the true doctrine; but we are not allowed, merely by their fruits, to judge of their doctrine itself. We must bring this to the test of the Scriptures as well; and, if rejected by this test, whatever the comparative excellence of deportment in the teachers, they and their doctrine are disallowed. The apostle puts the case, in favor of a false teacher, into the most authoritative form, surrounding him with the highest splendor of moral character and the most plausible show of a heavenly mission. He imagines his own appearance as the promulgator of a new Gospel. Should the convert whom Christ's glory smote down on the highway to Damascus—he who had been in labors more abundant, and in deaths oft, whose were miraculous tongues and miraculous works—should he bring to the Galatian church "another gospel," they were to turn from it and from its teacher without hesitation. He proceeds further: as if to put the decision into the strongest possible form, he imagines a teacher, possessing not merely the imperfect sanctity of erring man, but one invested with the holiness of an angel from heaven. His words do not describe Satan coming up out of the pit, and disguised as an angel of light; but he conceives an event yet more dazzling in its seductions, yet more perplexing and ensnaring to the mind of the learner. Should an angel from heaven, one yet recent from those glorious courts, and with the brightness of its moral splendor and its "beauty of holiness" still clinging about him, venture to sin, and commence his fall by preaching to our race another gospel, let him be accursed.

V. Paul did not think lightly of those benign and blessed spirits that are ministering to the heirs of salvation. They had often appeared to the apostles, and interposed effectually in their behalf. Paul knew their might and wisdom; he admired and emulated their holiness, their zealous obedience, their untiring diligence; but, in comparison with Christ and his truth, Paul loved not even angels. One of these beings had appeared to Peter, sleeping in the inner prison and chained between two soldiers, and rousing him, had led him forth through guards and barriers to liberty. When Paul was himself on ship-board, sailing towards Rome, an angel of God appeared to him, promising him the preservation of his own life and the lives of all his companions; and the promise was kept: but had Peter's deliverer, on their way after passing through "the iron gate that led into the city," commanded him to preach another gospel than Christ's, Peter would have rebuked his deliverer, and used to the tempter the rebuke he had once received himself from his Master, "Get thee behind me, Satan." Had the ministering Spirit who cheered Paul on his voyage stayed to preach to Paul's fellow-voyagers another gospel, Paul would have denounced the new system as a doctrine of devils: for no angel appearing from heaven could bring for his revelation the force of evidence we have for Christ's revelation, in its countless miracles, its accomplished prophecies, and the moral renovations wrought by its influence. And no angel has been promised those full influences of the Holy Spirit that were assured to the apostles for the benefit of the church. Were it possible, then, for one of these holy beings to fall away and become a preacher of heresy, great as might have been his splendor and wisdom, and his former holiness, Paul, the sinner—Paul, the forgiven persecutor, would have withstood and cursed him. The apostle was but a frail man; his body, like ours, a tabernacle of clay, crushed before the moth; yet, in all his weakness, had he met an angel of the highest rank in heaven, one of those "that excel in strength," returning from a mission like that to Sennacherib's camp, his right hand yet red with the blood of a hundred thousand warriors, and had that angel sought to turn the apostle from the truth as it was in Jesus, Paul would not have feared to denounce him in the name of their common Lord, and dust and ashes would have confounded the archangel.

What cause have we for gratitude that angels have not endeavored thus to subvert our faith. They have, on the contrary, given their constant attestation and subjection to Christ. They with songs announced his birth to the shepherds of Bethlehem. They ministered to him in the wilderness of temptation, and in the sorer agony of Gethsemane. Had he but summoned them, twelve legions had flown to his side; they guarded his tomb, and when it was visited by the weeping disciples, they testified his resurrection. When he ascended on high, they attended him; and when he shall return to judgment, they will troop around him. Meanwhile the mighty angel seen by John flying through heaven, was not seen denying, but publishing, the everlasting Gospel; and such is their attachment to our Lord, that every sinner believing in him has angels to rejoice in his conversion, and angels to minister to his onward course, to guard his departing spirit and to reclaim his deserted clay from the sepulchre. Their testimony, then, is ever for Christ: they enforce the witness of apostles, and by all their demeanor they bid man do what they have themselves done at the bidding of the Father—worship the Son; for, “when he bringeth in the first-begotten into the world, he saith, Let all the angels of God worship him.” (Heb. i: 6.) Rejecting that adoration when proffered to themselves, they cheerfully yield it to the Redeemer. He, then, that substitutes another Gospel for that of Paul, cannot plead angelic patronage or instruction. They adore where he blasphemes.

If true at all, then the Gospel is unmingled and immutable truth: no events can occur, no evidence be adduced authorizing us to modify that system which was given of God, and which God guards, and that, like its Divine Author, claims a perfection that admits neither amendment nor decay, the one unchangeable Gospel “WHICH IS NOT ANOTHER.”

VI. Those perverting the Gospel are accursed, not because fallible man has willed it, but God the Holy Ghost has pronounced the curse; and who may annul or dispute it? The fearful doom is not unmerited. Whatever the external recommendations of any such system, or of its advocates, did their show of excellence equal that of an angel, as yet but in the first hour of his fall, they inherit a fearful curse, because of the crime they commit and the mischief they occasion.

1. Of the greatness of the crime we form but inadequate conceptions, from the blindness produced by our share in the guilt of our race, and also from the faint and remote views we have of God. Yet what arrogance is it, evidently, to alter the teachings of the Unerring and the Omniscient, the Holy One of Israel,—what the fearfulness of the presumption, that would correct infinite wisdom and contradict the God of truth. There is something most daring and portentous in the ingratitude of the creature that would dictate and prescribe to the Creator who has made him, and the unwearied Benefactor whose sleepless vigilance protects him from destruction, and whose untiring bounty is daily supplying him. And how aggravated the sin of rejecting, on any pretext, the plans and the gifts of that Redeemer who has died for us, and of grieving that Spirit which would have reconciled and sanctified us. And what language can describe the aggravated cruelty of thus counter-working God's designs of mercy in the Gospel? It is a revelation of grace, in which wrath was to be appeased, that mercy might have its free course over the miseries of a groaning world. They who set aside this Gospel, remove or clog the channel of God's mercy, that his vengeance may have its original scope, and roll its consuming deluge over a world of sin. The man who would cut off the supplies of food from his famished fellow-creatures in a besieged town—the wretch who should in wantonness destroy all the remedies provided for a hospital in which crowds were tossing in agony—agony that, unrelieved, must issue in death, but which these remedies could not only relieve but remove—such a destroyer, such a traitor were surely not as cruel as the man who sets aside the true Gospel. For the religion of Christ is the food of the soul and the bread of heaven; and the atonement of Christ, as Paul preached it, is the one remedy for the wretchedness and sin of our race, and apart from it there is no salvation for the soul to all eternity.

2. The greatness of the mischief is necessarily incalculable. For all earthly powers must fail to span and to gauge that eternity, into which death ushers us, and for which the Gospel is to prepare us. To pervert that Gospel is to aid Satan in thrusting down our race to misery unremitting and unimaginable. What is a conflagration that lays a city in ashes, or a plague sweeping over the

breadth of the land,—what is loss of freedom, or reputation, or life, compared with the loss of the soul? And he who sets aside the Gospel ruins not one soul but many. "Their word will eat as doth a canker." Error is contagious. The victim of delusion will seek to quiet his conscience, and increase the influence of his system, by swelling the number of proselytes to his party from every side. Who can calculate the blind, led by the blind, that have already entered the pit, and are now even rejoicing on their way thither? To have any share in producing such mischief, is to aid in feeding the worm that never dies, and to heap fuel on the flame that is never quenched. May the mercy of God save us from such sin. Better were it to beg crumbs with Lazarus, and sit with Job on the dunghill, than to share riches, honor and power here, on condition of preaching another gospel, and prophesying smooth things, and crying "peace, peace," while God's own voice proclaims, "There is no peace to the wicked."

With these views, then, of the character of the Gospel, let us ask ourselves, as in the sight of God, Have we the Gospel that Paul preached, or do we receive another? If we receive that which he preached, do we obey it? If it be our hope and guide, let us hold it fast with an unwavering confidence, and defend it by a fearless profession, though man cavil at, or an angel contradict its testimonies; content with the assurance that what the Scriptures teach and the spirit seals shall stand, though the elements melt with fervent heat, and the heavens pass away as a scroll when it is rolled together.

1. It is evidently the interest and duty of every hearer of the Gospel to ascertain that he is receiving that system of truth which the apostles taught. The word of God allows not, nor will his bar acquit those who have trusted indolently in the numbers attached to their sect, or in the wisdom or piety of their teachers, while careless as to their own personal experience of religion, and neglect the earnest study of those Scriptures that are to try every doctrine and judge every spirit. In Paul's time the Gospel had its opposers among the Jews who sought after signs, and among the Greeks who looked for wisdom. And men now reject or modify the Gospel for the same causes. Should modern systems, therefore, demand our faith and claim to supplant the Gospel of

Paul, either because of the signs and wonders that attest them and the new revelations they boast to have received, on the one hand, or because of the superior wisdom, refinement and philosophy of those who defend them, on the other hand ; we do well to remember that we receive such systems at our peril. And the wo that smites the teachers of these errors will not spare their followers.

2. Errors in religion are neither rare nor harmless. If even in apostolic times there were not wanting heresies of the most fatal character, we have no reason to expect that they should become less numerous or less fatal, now that the age of miracles is past, and the presence of inspired and infallible teachers is withdrawn. And if, from these varied forms of religious belief, some would infer the harmlessness of error, and teach us that every system, calling itself christian, has in the main the great truths necessary to piety here and happiness hereafter, we need but bring their theory to the test of the text before us. The teachers opposing Paul, those at least in Galatia, preached apparently the same God and the same judgment and eternal retribution, as did the apostle ; nor is there any evidence that they disputed the divine mission of our Savior. But there was an entire difference of statement as to the way of salvation. How did Paul act ? Did he respect the independence of those who thus differed from him, and assert their essential union with himself in the great matters of the faith ? The course that he pursued so resolutely himself, and so impressively urged upon others, was far different. Instead of dwelling on the opinions held in common, as furnishing a sufficient basis for concord, and acknowledging in the truths they yet retained the basis of a common christianity, he denounced, without compromise or qualification, the opposing doctrine as being "another gospel." For it taught error as to the fundamental truth, the mode of a sinner's acceptance with God.

3. There are truths in religion of such vital importance that departure from them must destroy the soul. The holiness that the Gospel came to foster is the effect of truth received in the love of it. And this truth is in its own nature harmonious and one. Truth cannot contradict itself : nor in science or art can there be two opposed and warring truths. So is it also in religion. The singleness of truth constitutes the basis of its exclusiveness. It claims for itself, exclusively and without rival, the faith and obedi-

ence of mankind; a claim that is exclusive because it is just, and that could not be consistent without requiring thus the rejection of all error. These exclusive claims are often misrepresented as involving the most odious intolerance and illiberality. But in truth there is no more a possibility of the existence of several true religions, than there is of the existence of more than one God. From the one Jehovah there can emanate but the one truth—developed indeed in different degrees at different ages, in Judaism the bud, in Christianity the expanded flower,—but essentially, and in all ages, the one unchanged and unchangeable religion, revealing for man, the sinner, salvation, through an atonement and Mediator of divine appointment. Much of error may be mingled with this truth in various minds; but there are vital errors which the word of God has doomed as the seals of ruin in those who retain them. It recognises in the church of God one head and one foundation, and those only are acknowledged as the heirs of life who build on this foundation, and “WHO HOLD THE HEAD.”

SERMON CCCVIII.

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A VAIN RELIGION.

"This man's religion is vain."—James, 1:26.

There are probably few or none of you, my hearers, who do not acknowledge in some sense the necessity of religion, who do not feel that the wants of society require it, and that man's very nature makes it indispensable to his happiness. These broad principles are generally professed in this community, and have a powerful influence on mankind at large. Hence we see that men of every nation and of every rank are so generally led to respect religious institutions, and to seek mental repose in some mode of worship or some form of faith. There is, however, an universal danger lest men rest satisfied with any system of belief or any set of ceremonies which gives active exercise to the religious sentiment, even though it entirely fail of the great ends of true religion. The chief end of true religion is to lead the soul to God, and thus to sanctify, save, and exalt it. But much that is called religion falls short of this. Much of it has a contrary tendency. Much leads the soul to trust in itself, and inflates it with the pride of self-righteousness. Much of it forsakes God and deifies the reason. Much of it exalts and inaugurates idols in the human heart. Much of it is a form of godliness which palsies the power thereof; and much of it does all the mischief which must follow,

"When vice turns holy,
"Puts religion on, assumes the robe pontifical,
"And with the eye of saintly elevation
"Blesseth sin."

The apostle, in the text, speaks of a sort of religion which *is vain*. The instance which he mentions is one in which religion does not affect the conversation, does not "bridle the tongue," nor prevent it from uttering those words which injure others, which inflame evil passions, and betray the evil spirit that lurks within the heart. A man who exhibits such a defective character, may "*seem to be religious*;" he may be correct in his creed, and fluent in honied speech as well as bitter words, but

his religion is vain, for by his words he shall be judged, by his words condemned. They are opposed to the christian spirit, and "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of his."

Various are the cases in which it may be said of a man who respects the christian name, and supports christian institutions, and attends the christian sanctuary, and in many respects "seemeth to be religious," that his religion is vain. It is a mere semblance; it deceiveth his heart; it will fail in the day of judgment, and leave his soul hopeless. My friends, may God forbid that at last the pen of eternal truth should write "it is vain" upon the religion of any one of us. In order to guard against so fearful an evil, let me ask you to consider some of the cases in which this will certainly be done.

I. That will be found to be a vain religion, which is a mere *development of the religious sentiment natural to man*. You are all probably well aware that the history of the world and a sound inductive philosophy establish the fact, that religious veneration is as truly a part of man's nature, as intellect, conscience, or social affection. Like any other faculty or sentiment, it may be stronger in some than in others, yet its existence is universal. Hence it is that religious institutions have always existed in every clime and every condition of our race, and always will exist, either in the form of a pure worship or a baleful superstition. The elements of our nature from which they rise is indestructible; for even infidelity itself is but the reasoning power connected with an evil heart of unbelief, aiming its blows at the absurdities which superstition has engendered under the name of religion; and while it seeks to avoid *them*, as well as the moral restraints of christianity, by endeavoring to extirpate the religious sentiment itself, its efforts only prove that this inherent sentiment can never be destroyed. The truth of this seems to have made a strong impression on the mind of Napoleon Bonaparte, for he once observed in conversation, that while walking alone one evening, the sound of a church-bell fell upon his ear. Finding him in a genial mood, it seems to have awakened in his breast the most touching recollections of his childhood, and filled his soul with devotional feeling. "I was profoundly affected," says he, "such is the power of early habits and associations; and I considered if such was the case with me, what must not be the effect of such recollections upon the more simple and credulous vulgar. Let your philosophers answer that. *The people must have a religion.*"

This truth, that "the people must have a religion," has been well understood by the kings and statesmen of the earth. Hence it is that they have ever been so ready from motives of worldly policy to establish that form of religion which they deemed

most popular, so that by an alliance between the throne and the altar they might the better maintain their own power. But what we would here particularly observe is, that this religious sentiment may exist in sincerity and strength in the bosom of fallen man, without being at all connected with moral virtue, or aught that is acceptable to God. It may exist equally in the citizen and the savage, in the bad and the good, in the best and the worst of men. It was this which led the ancient mariners of Tarshish, when overtaken by a tempest, to cry to their idol gods for help. It was this which prompted the pagan Indians of America to offer up their daily worship. It is this which leads the Italian bandit to carry a pistol in one hand and a rosary in the other. It is this which induces those amongst all nations who pander to the vilest vices, to seek an interest in the prayers of the priesthood. It was this which once led some Greek pirates whose hands were red with the blood of the slain, to recoil with horror from a well-furnished table which they found in a captured vessel, when reminded by their captain that it was a fast-day of their church. It was this which constrained a robber on the high seas, some time ago, to pay respect to an American commander, in whose cabin he saw conspicuous a large quarto Bible. Wide as the world, and indestructible as humanity itself, is this powerful sentiment, which, though it exist in alliance with sin, points to God as the proper object of worship, and shows what man was designed to be originally, what he ought to be, and from what a height he has fallen.

Now if it be true that this natural sentiment exerts such a wonderful sway over the most wicked of our race, we can easily see that it must have a mighty influence over those whose morals have been cultivated, and whose sensibilities have been quickened by the teachings of christianity. Surrounded by the lights of knowledge and a well-ordered state of society, they have the same essential nature as the less favored portions of mankind. And if among the latter class, the religious sentiment is found in all its strength unconnected with any thing holy or pleasing to God, it may be so among the former, though developed in different modes. It may lead one to some outward act which superstition prescribes, and another to some act of a reasonable service prescribed by Divine authority, and yet to either it may be said, one thing thou lackest, without which *thy religion is vain*.

This is a far-reaching truth. It ought to be borne in mind by us in our self-examinations. I think of it on various occasions. I think of it when I see persons affected with religious emotions. I think of it amidst scenes of religious revivals, and am led to ask, has this awakening been produced,

or has its character been really modified, by a clear perception of the truths of the Bible? I think of it on entering an inquiry-room, and there beholding those whose sensibilities are aroused, and who, following some new impulse, have come to ask, "What shall we do?" I think of it in scrutinizing my own religious history, while I ponder the question, have I any inward experience which is something more than the stirrings of a natural sentiment,—something which proves the presence of the regenerating Spirit, and bears the seal of his workmanship? It becomes us all to think of it, and to see whether all we know about religion can be traced to this great spring of action; for if it can be, then we know nothing in reality of that state of which Paul spake when he said, "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature; old things are passed away and all things are become new;" of which Christ urged the necessity when he declared, "Except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

II. That religion is vain which consists in the *cultivation of mere natural goodness*. To show this, I am not now about to insist on those passages of Scripture which teach the doctrine of human depravity, which assert that all have "gone astray, that there is none that doeth good—no not one." Many there are who, when they hear these declarations applied universally, seem to imagine that the Scripture doctrine, as we hold it, confounds all distinction between what is amiable and what is unlovely, between decorum and dishonor, between the just and the unjust in our social relations. But this is far from being true, for the religion of the Gospel includes the social virtues; it only discards the idea that these may be *substituted* for all that God in the first table of the law demands of us. I would by no means deny that in popular language and in various connections it may be justly said that natural goodness pertains to man, but with my eye upon the Bible, I would by all means deny that he has any natural goodness which can save him. Let us seek distinctness in our use of terms. You apply the term *good* to any object in nature or art which was made for a right or useful end, and which answers the purpose of its formation. A good house is one which protects you from heat and cold, and which is conformed to your ideas of beauty or of comfort. A good ship is one whose capacity and fleetness combined answers the end of the merchant in her structure. A good painting is one which by a just and happy combination of color, light and shade, gives forth a strong and natural expression of character. In view of a particular relation, you apply the term *good* to any human being whose conduct is conformed to the design of that relation. Thus you speak of a good neighbor, a good citizen, a good parent, or a good child; but what do we mean strictly, when we speak of a *good man*? That depends upon our

idea of the true end for which man was made. And what end was that? In answering this question, the wisdom of the world looks not beyond the world, but heavenly wisdom regards man's spiritual nature, his high capacity to know, love, adore and obey God, and declares that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever." By the light of this principle, can he be regarded as truly a good man who habitually forgets God, prefers the friendship of the world to his, breaks his law, then slights the pardon "bought with mercy's proper blood," delights not in the study of his word, in prayer or praise, and lives for earthly interests and relationships rather than those which pertain to God and eternity? No, that cannot be. He may have an all-absorbing interest in honoring the relations which are temporal, without one spark of love to God; and without that his religion is a "vain show," a "sounding brass, a tinkling cymbal," a meteor gleam which will expire at the valley and the shadow of death, and leave him involved in a starless, hopeless, endless night.

III. That man's religion is vain which leads him to trust in the efficacy of mere repentance to save him. The Scriptures do undoubtedly speak of repentance as essential to salvation. So, too, do they speak of the spirit of obedience; but they no where imply that either the one or the other is, or can be, the ground of our justification in the sight of God. On the other hand, they assert that our salvation is not of works lest any man should boast, and not only that by the deeds of the law no flesh can be justified, but to those whom he had already addressed as penitents the apostle declares, that if Christ had not risen from the dead, they were *yet in their sins*.

Touching this important point, however, it has been asserted by a theological writer, that "repentance, genuine and effectual repentance, secures the Divine favor by a necessary action. But he whom God regards with favor cannot carry about with him a load of unforgiven sin. The supposition that the death of Christ was necessary as a means of procuring pardon for the penitent is therefore gratuitous, and founded on a misapprehension of the nature of forgiveness." Again, it is remarked of the Divine government, "by accepting the obedience of the contrite offender, it accomplishes its end, verifies its purpose; the law is made honorable by the fidelity of its requisition, and the welfare of those for whom the government was constructed, is secured as it could be in no other way. The forgiveness of the sinner upon his repentance, upholds the authority and promotes the end of the Divine government."

Now, if there were no such thing as a revelation from heaven—if the Great Teacher had never come with a message from the

Father to man, all this might have seemed as reasonable, for aught we could tell, as any thing else which human wisdom could suggest. From the lips of Socrates it might have seemed graceful; yet he, very sensible of the dimness of nature's light, modestly expressed his doubts about the conditions of salvation. But then the great aim of the Gospel is not only to teach us that there is a Savior, but also our need of one; and to do this, it shows us that the law of God, which, reaching to the heart, demands supreme love for him as the main-spring of action, can be satisfied with nothing short of a perfect obedience; and that if we have failed in that, to present to God the imperfect work of our own repentance as a substitute, is to bring a "*vain oblation*." For—overlooking the ill-desert of all past sin, in view of which the Gospel, as it meets the sinner, tells him that he is *condemned already*—repentance, it is obvious, does not secure to the law a perfect obedience for the future. It leaves the sinner "with a law in his members, warring against the law of his mind," even though his conscience consent unto the law of God that it is good. The more enlightened and holy he becomes, the more clearly he discerns those secret faults and sad defects which call for a fresh repentance, so that he is forced to say, as did one of old, with stronger and stronger emphasis, "Who can tell how often he offendeth?" "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean;" purify my soul with the blood of a Divine atonement.

If, then, the law of God requires a perfect obedience, and the repenting sinner is still very imperfect, how can he be justified and saved by the *necessary action* of repentance? It is impossible. A hope of salvation, based on the natural effect of repentance, is utterly vain, and must leave the soul without support in the trying hour, unless it can be shown, that although repentance have no such necessary action on the government of God, yet he has promised to forgive sins simply on account of it. But to say that God has promised this, would be to contradict all those testimonies which assert pardon to be indispensably connected with faith in the atoning Savior. Among the last words which Christ uttered on earth, was the message, "He that believeth shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned;" and when his apostle afterwards wrote, "Without shedding of blood there is no remission," it was no more than what Christ himself had taught, when he said, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you."

A partial and defective view of the plan of salvation may be fatal to any man, and in no case is it more needful to remember that maxim of Christ, "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." This rule is violated by those who, in teaching their doctrine of forgiveness, quote some passage which insists on the

necessity of repentance, and then assert that repentance will of itself reconcile us to God, without any faith in the atonement of Christ. As well might a reader, in view of Paul's declaration, "We conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law," infer that the apostle thought that a sinner could be saved without repentance, or any good works at all. Sometimes repentance is mentioned alone, and sometimes faith alone, and at other times hope alone; (Rom. 8:24;) but according to the true idea of a saving conversion, one cannot exist without the rest. Even under the old economy, when the prophet lifted up his voice and cried, "If the wicked man turn from his wickedness he shall surely live," the people knew that no repentance would be accounted genuine which did not lead the penitent to bring his sacrifice to the altar—to offer there the propitiation which God had appointed as the symbol of a better sacrifice, which was to be revealed in the "fulness of time." The feelings of the true penitent could find repose only in such a faith, and hence we cannot but see the justness of the remark of Bishop Butler, that "though the efficacy of repentance alone to prevent what mankind had rendered themselves obnoxious to, and recover what they had forfeited, is now insisted on in opposition to christianity, yet, by the general prevalence of propitiatory sacrifices over the heathen world, this notion of repentance alone being sufficient to expiate guilt appears to be contrary to the general sense of mankind." How clearly, then, does this great doctrine of the Gospel find its echo in the bosom of humanity! Far and widely throughout the earth, in lands illumined by revelation or covered with pagan darkness, we find the idea of propitiation enshrined in all the splendor of ritual worship; and at whatever point we commence the investigation of its origin, history or tradition traces it up to that spot where the second father of mankind, saved from the flood which overwhelmed his race, erected his altar and offered his sacrifice in the exercise of a pure and acceptable faith; and thus we see, that while the word of inspiration declares to an apostate world its need of the atonement of Christ in order to receive the pardon of sin, the voice of every nation and every age gives back a deep and solemn response to the truth of the Spirit's testimony.

* IV. That is a vain religion which *does not induce a practical submission to the authority of God.* The history of the world shows that, ever since the fall of man, much effort has been made to institute religions which treated the authority of God very lightly. Even in Eden, the tempter would fain persuade our first parents that they could be religious, notwithstanding their disobedience; "Ye shall not surely die," said he, "but your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods." The eating of the fruit of a certain tree seemed to be a small thing in itself, but when made the test of submission to God's authority, what a train of momentous consequences followed!

And ever since that day, the controversy between all true and all false religion has turned on a question which involved the principle of obedience to God's authority. This has marked the difference between the really converted and the unconverted. We see this developed in the family of Adam. It was the obedience of faith which distinguished the character of Abel from that of Cain; for notwithstanding Cain's transgressions, he seemed to be religious, inasmuch as he brought his offering to the altar. This principle was inculcated on the antediluvians, and by them rejected, for they walked in the way of their own heart. It was inculcated on the descendants of Noah and rejected, for by them idolatry was spread through the world. It was inculcated on the seed of Abraham, and often rejected, for how sadly at times did they prove themselves to be a recreant race, who "feared the Lord and served their own gods." And even within the pale of Christendom, how many have taken upon them the name of Christ, while they have rejected those very doctrines whose main support is his authority. How many have treated with reverence the outward forms of service; have been punctilious in observing days, months, times, years, feasts, fasts, and oblations; have been ever zealous in doctrinal controversy, while they have neglected Christ's moral precepts, and yet have called their religion *practical christianity*! How many have agreed to obey his moral precepts as far as they seemed to be reasonable, while they have treated his doctrines and institutions with indifference, and yet have called theirs a *rational religion*!

Oh! it is of little moment whether a man happen to agree with Jesus Christ in one point or many, so long as he refuses to receive any thing on the *simple authority* of Christ. *He is not a Christian*; his religion is fatally defective. The impress of the Spirit of grace is not on his character. The regenerate on earth cannot own him as one of them; and the cherubim and seraphim on high, who, while they soar, yet veil their faces with their wings, and bow before the Savior in meek humility, could hold no fellowship with such a spirit. My hearers, let us beware of calling Jesus, "Lord, Lord," while we believe not all his words, and do not the things which he has commanded; for Christianity is a religion of love, and this is the love of God, that we believe on him whom he hath sent, and keep his commandments; for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, nor birth, nor blood, nor rank, nor place, nor learning, nor accomplishments, but faith which worketh by love, and the keeping of the commandments of God.

And now how important is the question, Have I true religion? Have I a religion which is something more than the mere development of a natural sentiment, something more than the cultivation of natural goodness, something more than a reliance on the natural effect of repentance, and one which involves a supreme regard to

the authority of Christ? Have I a heaven-taught religion, the religion of the Bible, which commences with conviction of sin, issues in regeneration, and is to be consummated at last in the perfection of holiness? Have I the *religion of faith* taught by Christ, preached by the apostles, exemplified by the primitive church, and attested by the holy company of martyrs; a religion which wounds but to heal, which humbles yet exalts, condemns yet saves? Have I a religion which unites me to the Savior, which leads me to derive from his fulness "grace for grace," light, peace and joy, and to grow up unto him in all things, who is the Head? If so, then I know that I have not a vain religion, but an eternal vital reality, the religion of the spiritual church on earth, and the religion of heaven, where I shall see Jesus as he is, and be like him, and rejoice before him with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

But, ah me! if I have not this, then my religion is vain; "for," saith the Lord, "he that heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man who built his house upon a rock; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded upon a rock. But he that heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it, and the ruin of that house was great."